

- I. Project Title: **Verification of stocked razorback sucker reproduction in the Gunnison and upper Colorado rivers via annual collections of larvae.**
- II. Principal Investigator(s):  
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- III. Project Summary:

Wild razorback suckers were last captured in the Gunnison River in the late 1970s (Holden et al. 1981) and in the upper Colorado River in the late 1990s (from the Walter Walker Wildlife Area in 1998). Wild razorback sucker are virtually extirpated in these two river systems. Restoration stocking of razorback sucker began in April 1994 in the Gunnison River and has continued annually since that time (Burdick 2003). About 19,250 juvenile, sub-adult, and adult razorback sucker were stocked between 1994 and 2003. Restoration stocking began in the upper Colorado River in 1999 and is ongoing. Through 2003, about 47,500 juvenile, sub-adult, and adult razorback sucker have been stocked in the Colorado River.

To produce a self-sustaining population in a particular river system, stocked individuals need to 1) survive, 2) remain in the vicinity of release, or if displaced downstream, return upstream to spawn, 3) successfully spawn in either the Gunnison or upper Colorado rivers, and 4) progeny need to survive to adulthood and be retained in or return to the Gunnison and upper Colorado river so as to maintain an adult population there. Razorback sucker stocked in the Gunnison River near Delta, Colorado, have been recaptured upstream from the Redlands Diversion Dam subsequent to their release. Twenty of these, recaptured between 1997–2001, had been at large for more than six months post-stocking (Burdick 2003). Six of these fish were at large at least 18 months (17.9–50.2 months) following release. Five of these six were at least 300 mm when stocked. All six fish were >390 mm long when recaptured, and therefore presumably sexually mature. How many stocked razorback suckers survive and remain in the Gunnison River is unknown, but those that have will spawn if suitable spawning conditions are present. The capture of razorback sucker larvae provides verification that stocked fish have successfully spawned.

This project was initiated as a means to document the occurrence of razorback sucker larvae in the Gunnison River and thereby verify that successful reproduction occurs. In the first year, 2002, larvae were indeed found. Hence, the initial objective of the study, to determine whether razorback suckers can and will reproduce in the Gunnison River, has been achieved. However, this important discovery now leads to new questions and objectives. To restore the Gunnison River as razorback sucker habitat and promote a self-sustaining population there, managers need more information regarding patterns of reproduction, and more importantly, to determine what is needed to promote larval survival and later recruitment to the adult population. Are more larvae produced during years with specific flow conditions? What is the distribution of larvae? Documenting patterns of larval distribution may help identify spawning sites and perhaps areas that could be managed as nursery habitat. The methodology is to search for larvae in backwater and shoreline habitats during and immediately after the suspected spawning period for a period of about six weeks during May and early June. The study area includes the Gunnison River upstream of the Redlands Diversion Dam near Grand Junction to Confluence Park in Delta, Colorado (rm 3.0-57.0). In 2004, the study area was expanded to include the 57 miles of the upper Colorado River from the Grand Valley Irrigation Company Diversion (rm 185.1) in Palisade, Colorado, downstream to the Westwater Ranger Station, Utah (rm 127.6). A combination of daytime shoreline seining and over-night light-trapping have been used to capture larvae. The Larval Fish Laboratory at Colorado State University performs larvae identification. This past year, 2004, was initially intended to be the last of a three-year field effort, but additional years of sampling are now anticipated.. In 2002, eight razorback sucker larvae were captured, seven with dip-net sampling and one with light-trap sampling. In 2003, seven razorback sucker larvae were collected, all from seine samples, and all between May 21 and June 10. No lab work has yet been done on the samples collected in 2004.

#### IV. Study Schedule: 2001-2006

- V. Relationship to RIPRAP: Colorado River Action Plan: Gunnison River IV.A.1.b(2) Monitor and evaluate stocking results; make recommendations regarding further augmentation.
- VI. Accomplishment of FY 04 Tasks and Deliverables, Discussion of Initial Findings and Shortcomings:

##### Tasks

1) Collect samples of larvae. This task was completed on schedule. Because almost all razorback sucker larvae collected in the Gunnison River in 2002 and 2003 were from areas that would not have been accessible for light-trapping, sampling in 2004 relied entirely on dip-net sampling. This provides coverage of the whole study reach allowing distributional information to be collected in addition to just presence/absence results. Sampling was done by a two-person crew boating down the river and sampling habitats with a fine mesh net set between two hand brailes. A total of 204 seine samples were collected from the Gunnison River between May 5 and June 25. A total of 167 seine samples were collected from the Colorado River between May 13 and June 24.

2). Analyze samples in the lab. This task has not yet been started.

VII. Recommendations: Continue monitoring in 2005 using the 2004 protocol.

VIII. Project Status: Project is ongoing and on-track. Field work is scheduled to continue through 2005 and report writing and completion in 2006. However, field sampling may extend beyond 2005, depending on Recovery Program priorities.

IX. FY 2004 Budget

A. Funds Provided:	43,740
B. Funds Expended:	<u>43,740</u>
C. Difference:	0
D. Publication costs	0

X. Status of Data Submission: Data will be submitted to the database manager upon completion of the study in 2006.

XI. Signed: Douglas Osmundson, Fishery Biologist, Lead investigator  
11/05/04

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